



# Connecticut State University American Association of University Professors

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*1615 Stanley Street • Marcus White Hall, Room 316 • New Britain, CT 06050*

## **Testimony to the Appropriations Committee**

February 15, 2023

Good evening Senator Osten and Representative Walker, and all the members of the Appropriations Committee. My name is John O'Connor and I teach in the Sociology Department at Central Connecticut State University in New Britain. I am active in CSU-AAUP, the faculty union. I am testifying before this committee tonight to urge you to amend and expand upon the Governor's budget proposal for the CSCU system. As this committee knows – budgets are moral documents, they contain our priorities and our values. But budgets are also the mechanism by which we choose a future. That is what we are all doing here tonight – we are deciding the future of our state.

When it comes to the morality of the budget and the future of Connecticut, Representative Walker had it right when she said in November of last year that “this is the time to cut into the inequities that cause so many families to fall behind.” She named higher education as one of the key areas where agency spending had lapsed. If the Governor's budget proposal stands it will injure students and it will injure our state. Budget guardrails make no sense if there are no education on-ramps; middle-class tax cuts make no sense if you are increasing the cost of higher education.

The CSCU system – our community colleges and state universities – plays a crucial in our state. You all know the story: our students come from our state and they remain here. CSCU institutions contribute to our economy, they are key pathways to social mobility, and they ensure that those marginalized by race, class, immigration status, age, sexuality, religion or disability have the opportunity to pursue their dreams and future.

One of the paradoxes of the COVID-19 pandemic is that it enabled our state to move beyond its chronic fiscal crisis. But the existence of budget surpluses is not the end game, it is what we do with those surpluses that really matters. Given the economic return on investment in public higher education – higher rates of productivity, an informed citizenry, educational accessibility for economically challenged households – cuts and flat-funding of our institutions is not the way forward. The Governor's proposal will result in more tuition hikes; it will close the education door on many poor households. that cannot pay the tuition and the other costs of a university education. As it stands, the Governor's budget proposal will actually decrease access to higher education.

It is important that we don't make our colleges and universities (and our students) COVID victims after the fact. Yes, the colleges and universities have enrollment challenges right now, but increased public spending today is key to enrolling students tomorrow. The CSCU system needs substantial investment to lower the effective price for current and possible future students that will result in higher rates of attendance and completion.

I have been teaching at CCSU for close to 20 years, I have encountered far too many students that have suffered the financial fade – that is, students that cannot afford the deferred wages and up-front costs of attendance. They know the benefits and rewards of a university degree, but they cannot make it work. Far too many students in the CSCU system get priced out; they get pushed out not because they cannot do the work but because they couldn't afford school. We have a large pool Higher Ed "disappeared" in this state – students who vanish without a trace, without a degree.

The decisions that this committee makes are not really about a system or individual institutions – it will make decisions that impact the lives of people who are trying to educate and better themselves. As a committee, you will decide about the values and the future of our state. Your decision will be about equity.

This Committee can open doors, but this committee can also close doors. I hope that you keep the doors to higher education open.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify.